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# THE EXTINCTION OF FOREST PRODUCTS AND WOOD SCIENCE ACADEMIC PROGRAMS

Once upon a time, there were numerous forest products and wood science programs throughout the United States, many of which were comprised of one or a small handful of faculty that were attached to a department of forestry or something with a very similar sounding name. The programs constantly struggled to achieve a critical mass of faculty and were clearly small in numbers compared to a handful of much bigger programs.

However, these programs were quite successful by whatever metric employed at producing good students, high quality research, and public service. This is no small achievement, particularly considering the limited resources of these programs. Many students from these programs went on to leadership positions in the industry or graduate school at larger programs. At smaller programs, there tends to be more emphasis on conducting applied research for the local industry. Indeed, these small programs have a long history of applied research to benefit the local industry as well as successfully competing for national competitive grants, publishing the findings in high quality journals, and receiving patents for novel work. Service has historically been a corner stone of smaller programs. This includes service to the industry as well as to professional organizations. The larger programs have the critical mass of faculty to provide an undergraduate program and address a wider variety of research problem areas.

Forest products and wood science programs throughout the United States continue to disappear at an alarming rate. This is not a new occurrence and is not just limited to the small programs. Historically strong programs such as those at the University of Michigan and Yale are now gone and the University of California at Berkeley has lost its graduate program. More recently, Mississippi State suspended new enrollment into its forest products undergraduate major. Undergraduates entering the program enroll in a forestry major and select forest products as their option. This year, the State University of New York at Syracuse (SUNY) announced the termination of its wood science undergraduate program. The University of Washington no longer has a large wood science program but has retained paper science, marketing, and developed new programs in polymer science and bioenergy. In recent years, four small wood science programs (Ohio State University, University of Illinois, Southern Illinois University, and Texas A&M University) have lost their last wood science faculty member to retirement or resignation and the positions were lost or frozen due to budget constraints. Other programs (e.g., Louisiana Tech, Clemson, Iowa State, University of Arkansas–Monticello, and University of Missouri) have a small number of senior faculty near retirement age and the wood science programs at these schools also face extinction.

One can argue that not all states need a wood science program. Indeed, many states never have had nor will have a wood science program. However, one cannot logically argue that any current program should be terminated. Each current program is unique in its strengths and ability to serve local, national, and international needs. Wood science is continuing to evolve in new directions and is just as relevant today as

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ever. Wood scientists are needed to conduct research, teaching, and outreach in rapidly developing fields such as bio-energy, bio-chemicals, nano-science, and environmentally friendly wood preservatives just to name a few. Students are desperately needed to take a wide variety of industry related positions. The demand for wood fiber will always parallel human population growth patterns. Therefore, as global population continues to increase so will the need for more efficient use of wood fiber. The wood science breakthroughs of tomorrow begin in the class room today with a sound wood science education.

The attrition and extinction of our wood science programs is alarming. The loss of any faculty position is unfortunate, for any sized program, but this loss becomes tragic when it represents 50% or 100% of the wood science faculty at a particular program. Likely, new wood science faculty will be extremely difficult to achieve over the next several years and most academic programs have decided to focus on maintaining assets and given up on growing the program due to harsh economic realities. Toward this end, I would like to see SWST aggressively lobby universities to keep wood science positions in the field of wood science upon retirement of any wood science faculty member. Wood science academia has done a poor job of communicating our economic and environmental benefit to the universities and society as a whole. It is understandable that the particular focus of a position may change from one area of wood science to another based on current and anticipated trends. However, what is less understandable is the continual decline of wood science faculty and undergraduate programs across the United States. All programs compete for students and funding. However, this is a cause in which we can all unite for the betterment of the profession. I urge all readers of this journal to join in this cause and lobby academic decision makers to hire a wood science person when a wood scientist retires at any university.

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